

Contributions

BIBLE PORTRAITS—Isaac and His Sons

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The promise of a numerous seed, "a multitude of nations," to Abraham and Isaac appeared to be almost contradicted by natural circumstances, both patriarchs being childless until far advanced in life. Like all God's promises, this one was to be received by faith before it entered upon the stage of tangible fulfillment. The Lord would see whether these elect ones could believe and wait, perhaps through long years of apparent disappointment, for neither the promise nor its accomplishment would mean anything for the world or for the glory of God unless the seeds of religion could be planted in the chosen recipients of the covenant blessing, and thereby preserved to the world.

The son of the old age of Abraham and Sarah was not so energetic a character as his father, or his sons after him. His was a quiet, pious, unobtrusive temperament, free from the turmoils, wanderings, embroilments and troubles which attended the other patriarchs. The most striking incident in his career was the appointed sacrifice on mount Moriah, in which he displayed a marked submissiveness to the decree of God and the authority of his father. Much criticism has been expended upon this remarkable scene, which is not our province to discuss here. What we have to consider is the spirit of humility and resignation which distinguished the conduct of Isaac on this occasion, and which indeed marked the whole course of his life. It would probably be more difficult to find a grown lad in these days who would uncomplainingly consent to be the Isaac than it would be to find a father who would act the Abraham in a ceremony of sacrifice. He was a dutiful son, and in that respect a pattern to young men. Filial, gentle, meditative, a lover of peace, always yielding his manifest rights rather than have controversy, a model husband and affectionate father, he became the most distinguished scriptural type of the simple, godly, peaceable, spiritual, blameless life, walking with God without offense, gaining the respect of his neighbors, and leaving behind him an imperishable influence for righteousness, unstained by a single act of impurity, selfishness or injustice.

The eminent character of Isaac did not pass on to his two sons in the ample and generous measure which makes him so amiable and distinguished a scriptural personage. There was a lower moral and spiritual tone in both of them, particularly in Esau, who profanely sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, and thereby earned the contempt of succeeding generations; a poor enough bargain, but which is constantly repeated in hu-

man history by men and women who seem to be incapable of appreciating the value of spiritual things, and live only for the gratification of present appetite, at whatever cost. In other respects he appeared to be a generous, large hearted man, bestowing filial attentions upon his aged father, bitterly repenting his foolish bargain with Jacob when it was too late to recover the blessing, and eventually forgiving his brother for the mortal injuries which he had received from his hand.

In his early life Jacob was little better than Esau, excepting in the one point that he valued the birthright, the essence of which was the divine blessing, and thereby early indicated that profound faith in God which was the redeeming feature of his rather checkered life. He meanly took advantage of his brother's extremity, who returning from an unsuccessful hunt in a famished condition, was surprised by the contemptible proposition to sell him a sorry mess of boiled herbs for a priceless consideration, and in an evil hour yielded to hunger and disgust. Doubtless Jacob had a hundred times eaten of Esau's savory venison without having to pay for it, and this contemptible return for his hospitality and generosity was calculated to make him despise the spiritual objects which could be pursued in a manner so unmanly and mean. We do not attempt to excuse the fatal levity which made him part on such terms with his birthright, but we are even less inclined to palliate the conduct of the sneak who charged him such a price for his greens and beans, and afterwards confirmed his extortion by an act of fraud which in our day would give him a fair title to ordinary jail fare. He first extorted the birthright and afterwards stole it, thus gaining by a double crime that to which he had no natural title. No wonder that the sneak and the fraud was afraid to face his outraged brother after these interesting transactions, and pretty soon we see him hieing across the desert to take refuge with his uncle Laban. Tho for obvious reasons retaining God's favor, the Lord punished him for his trickery by making him suffer severely by the trickery of Laban and afterwards the more criminal trickery of his own sons.

Two sharpers met when Jacob and Laban got together. It was flint cut flint, but Jacob finally got the better of Laban, and at the end of fourteen years' service slipped away between two days, with family and flocks. The romance of his love for Rachel was the humanizing and redeeming feature of this part of his history, and went far toward saving for him the sympathy and respect of mankind.

But whatever his faults, one pre-eminent virtue, running without interval like a golden thread throughout his

whole career, rescues his character from ruin and his reputation from oblivion. It was his faith in God, his burning desire and unshaken determination to win the divine blessing, which finally culminated, at the end of that memorable night of wrestling, in the transformation of his character, the regeneration of his soul, the significant change of his name, and the deliverance of himself and family from the just vengeance of Esau. The life of Jacob, or Israel as we now know him, was as blameless after that event as before it had been blame worthy, and he handed it down to his posterity untarnished, destined to be more memorable in the history of the world than any other name in the long roll of nations and peoples and kindreds and tongues.

HUMAN INSTRUMENTALITY

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The work of saving the lost is the Lord's, for without Christ we can do nothing. In emphasizing this truth we must still bear in mind that divinely directed human effort and the employment of rational means are, in most cases, elements of the Lord's plan both for converting the sinner and for energizing and sanctifying the church. To minify the value of human effort and to rely wholly upon means that are super-rational does not add to God's glory, for the work of saving men and the glory of it are His whether salvation be wrought solely thro the Spirit's silent power or whether he calls to his aid agencies which are human and natural.

That God is the source to which every worker must look for success and power must be realized by every one, but just how far God employs human agency and natural means in the conversion of sinners and the making of saints is a matter concerning which much difference of opinion exists. Some have wholly eliminated the human element, and make salvation a matter of election pure and simple. Others have gone even farther astray by almost eliminating the divine element, rejecting the super-naturalness of religion and making salvation a matter of "works" rather than of grace. The truth lies between these two extremes. The work is the Lord's; he directs and blesses and completes it, and without him we can do nothing, but he still employs men and natural means just so far as such agencies will avail. When Jesus called Lazarus to life he put forth divine power; human effort and natural means were inadequate; the work was too high for men, only God could perform it. But when he would have the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher, or when he would have Lazarus freed from the entangling grave clothes, he directed the disciples to do it because it was a work commensurate with human ability. He might have rolled the stone away by the